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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that classroom discussions are important sites of investigation, not for the purpose of identifying and prescribing effective discussion strategies, but for understanding why particular discursive strategies tend to dominate classroom talk and what might be done to alter such practices. The paper is grounded in feminist postmodernist thinking, which seeks to continue the struggle against sexism while developing new paradigms of social criticism. The paper is divided into three sections. The first section explains what is meant by discursive practices and then identifies predominant discursive practices associated with classroom discussions of texts. In the second section work on text-based classroom discussions is examined for instances of how ingrained, gendered ways of thinking have perpetuated particular discursive practices. The third section explores ways of expanding possibilities so as to understand more fully the complexities of learning from and about text-based classroom talk. Contains 67 references. (RS)

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Gender, Text, and Discussion

Expanding the Possibilities

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Spring 1994

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Gender, Text, and Discussion: Expanding the Possibilities

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National Reading Research Center
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Gender, Text, and Discussion: Expanding the Possibilities

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It seems that in these postmodern times, we are experiencing a renaissance that embraces the possibilities of new ways of thinking about knowing, being, and believing. This renaissance has the potential to affect profoundly the ways of implementing and researching text-based classroom discussions, but it is a renaissance that extends beyond academic concerns. In *Healing and the Mind*, Moyers (1993) reported on new insights into mind-body connections and ways in which healing is a matter of meaning, not mechanics. The move in medical circles away from dichotomizing the mind and the body echoes Derrida's deconstruction of Western philosophical thought, which has framed our understanding of the world in two-term oppositions, for example, male/female, rational/irrational (Orr, 1991).

We find this renaissance challenging and compelling. It is a challenge to read the polyphony of texts on postmodernism, poststructuralism, feminisms, critical and feminist pedagogies, and more. We feel compelled to accept the challenge to explore new ways of thinking that run counter to our own rooted ways of thinking. In particular, we see many windows of opportunity for moving beyond the ingrained dominance of a male Western philosophical mode of thinking. Thus, we have begun a quest to find, construct, and articulate new ways of thinking about text-based classroom discussions from feminist postmodernist perspectives. This paper provides a forum for sharing the beginnings of our quest. Our goal is to explore possibilities for expanding current discursive practices so as to deal more equitably with gender-related issues in classroom talk about texts.

In this paper, we argue that classroom discussions are important sites of investigation, not for the purpose of identifying and prescribing effective discussion strategies, but for understanding why particular discursive practices tend to dominate classroom talk and what might be done to alter such practices. In particular, we examine discursive practices that construct one's sense of self and other for the purpose of exploring ways teachers, students, and researchers can begin to "interrupt" (Brodkey, 1992, p. 310) those practices that are

counterproductive to learning from and about text-based classroom talk. We ground our remarks in feminist postmodernist thinking, which seeks to continue the struggle against sexism while developing new paradigms of social criticism — paradigms that speak to possibilities and not just to givens (Nicholson, 1990).

The paper is divided into three major sections. In the first section, we explain what we mean by discursive practices and then identify predominant discursive practices currently associated with classroom discussions of texts. In the second section, we examine our own work on text-based classroom discussion for instances of how ingrained, gendered ways of thinking have perpetuated particular discursive practices. In the third section, we explore ways of expanding possibilities — of moving beyond currently accepted discursive practices — so as to understand more fully the complexities of learning from and about text-based classroom talk.

PREDOMINANT DISCURSIVE PRACTICES IN CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

In laying the groundwork for what we mean by discursive practices, it is important to draw distinctions between what Gee (1990) refers to as discourses with a lowercase d, which include connected stretches of language that make sense, like conversations, stories, reports, and arguments (p. 142), and Discourses with an uppercase D, which are:

> ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, beliefs, attitudes, social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions and clothes.... A Discourse is a sort of "identity kit" which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize." (p. 142)

Still another way to conceive of Discourses, Gee suggests, is as clubs with (tacit) rules about who is a member and who is not and (tacit) rules about how members ought to behave (if they wish to continue being accepted as members) (Gee, 1990, p. 143).

Thus, it is clear from Gee's use of the term, a Discourse involves more than just talk. It involves all the discursive practices that signal one's membership in a particular group. For example, having been educated as teachers means we have learned to think, act, and speak like teachers; it also means we recognize (and are recognized by) others who have been similarly educated into the teaching profession. Other Discourses that we have learned include (but are not limited to) how to be graduate students, women, daughters, and U.S. citizens.

In the 1960s, Foucault asserted that social institutions construct themselves through their discursive practices (Orr, 1991). Since that time, discursive practices have been studied in connection with peace activists (Blain, 1991), academic conferences (Morton, 1987), organizational management (Mumby & Stohl, 1991), patient-centered medicine (Silverman & Bloor, 1990), honor in an Arab community (Gilsenan, 1989), and many other areas. Smith (1987)

proposed that a closer focus on the discursive practices of schools would lead to theories that better account for the complexities of schooling.

Most relevant to our focus on discursive practices in this paper is the work of Bronwyn Davies (1989), who has written about the discursive production of the male/female dualism in classroom settings and the power differentials this dualism engenders. Davies (1989, 1990a, 1990b) has examined some of the ways in which discursive practices position young children, such that beliefs about the male/female dualism embedded in the usual stories that children hear and read become a lived reality in the classroom. Based on this research, Davies has written on why primary school children have difficulty seeing the princess, Elizabeth, as a hero in *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch & Marchenko, 1980), despite the fact that Elizabeth rescues the prince, Ronald, from the dragon. She suggests that the predominance of other narratives about males rescuing females precludes a feminist hearing of the text by even the youngest of children.

Davies' (1990a, 1993) research on how some texts tend to perpetuate the male/female dualism ties in with Gilbert's (1989) concern that privileging the personal in child-centered pedagogies may encourage the construction of stereotypical female subject positions which limit [females'] understanding of their textual inscription and encourage them to see such inscription as "natural" and "normal" (Gilbert, 1989, p. 263). One implication to be drawn from Gilbert's work is that classroom discussions need to include opportunities for students to question textual inscriptions that define or relegate women and men to particular gendered positions.

The discursive practices that are of interest to us in this paper are those associated with the Discourse of text-based classroom discussion. Of particular interest is how gendered discursive practices are manifested in the language of the classroom and the language of the text.

Language of the Classroom

In class discussions, there are tacit language conventions for holding the floor, interrupting the discussion, and introducing new topics. These conventions are bound up with power relationships among participants in a discussion, such as *who* speaks *when* and to *whom* (Fowler, 1985). They are also representative of discursive practices that reproduce gender inequalities based on power differentials emanating from society at large. In illustrating how tacit language conventions can operate in classroom discussions to unwittingly perpetuate gender inequalities, we draw upon the research of Alton-Lee, Nuthall, and Patrick (1993) and their analyses of sixth-graders' public and private statements. In an excerpt from their analyses, we learn how a male teacher's perceptions of a female student, Ann, are colored by discursive practices that have become all but invisible to both teacher and student.

> Ann's style of participation in the lesson indicated almost total continuous involvement in the tasks or with the content. Of all the case-study children, she was most often observed to be focused on the teacher or on a relevant

resource. Ann received no positive feedback from the teacher for her two publicly nominated responses, and she appeared frustrated in her desire to participate publicly more frequently. Of the four [case-study] children, she was least likely to elicit teacher nomination with her hand raises: her fifteen hand raises during the lesson only elicited two teacher nominations. Ann responded by calling out her answers five times and by talking privately at a rate of two or three utterances per minute. A third of these utterances involved cooperative interactions with her friend Julia. This private peer interaction appeared to play an important, mutually supportive role in both girls' management of the evaluative climate during the lesson. Julia sought Ann's help with strategies to remember the dates presented by the teacher. Ann shared her misconceptions with Julia. This talk was hidden, enabling Ann to give and receive peer support during the lesson, yet allowing her to avoid being seen by the teacher as contravening the rules of order.

Her management (masking) of her contravention of the rules of order was so effective that even when the teacher reviewed the video (long after the unit), Ann's private utterances were hidden, and he commented that "Ann doesn't offer as much as some of the others in terms of an active type of learning.... She learns just sitting and soaking it up." (Alton-Lee et al., 1993, p. 67)

We believe that certain discursive practices emanating from differential gender expectations for students may account for why Ann's teacher saw her as a passive learner. One of those practices involves allowing boys to talk more than girls in classroom discussions (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 1992). According to the AAUW report, titled *How Schools Shortchange Girls* (1992), females are called on less frequently than males, and they are rewarded more often for compliance than for critical thinking. LaFrance's (1991) review of research suggests that teachers believe girls talk more than boys, when in fact, the reverse has been documented. Ann's teacher may have unconsciously decided that Ann's two public responses were sufficient. This would fit with LaFrance's (1991) finding that cultural clichés about females' proclivity for talk influence who is called on and who is ignored. Another discursive practice that may have been operating in Ann's class is the expectation that female students are just naturally good listeners. LaFrance (1991) suggests that verbal participation by female students may be regarded as less valuable than listening. Thus, the teacher's comment that Ann "learns just sitting and soaking it up" may have been his way of saying that he values the listening ability of females.

LaFrance (1991) also reviewed research that shows females are interrupted more often than males. Individuals who interrupt others' speech can be viewed as exerting power over or controlling those whom they interrupt. The extent to which controlling or collaborative language occurs in classroom discussions may be related to the sex of participants. In a study

of five- and seven-year-old children, Leaper (1991) found that seven-year-old girls used more collaborative speech acts than did boys and younger girls. Although collaborative speech increased with age among the girls in female dyads, this was not the case for girls in mixed dyads.

What constitutes an interruption is a complex issue (Murray, 1985). For purposes of this paper, however, we use the term to refer to those instances when speakers are cut off before they have made their points. Interestingly, interruptions are not limited to school-age females; even a world leader like Margaret Thatcher is known to have been interrupted by interviewers more frequently than her male counterparts (Beattie, Cutler, & Pearson, 1982).

Language of the Text

Just as there are power differentials present in the discursive practices found in classroom discussion, so too are they manifested in the language of texts. Power differentials related to the social and cultural meanings attributed to being male or female are evident in the language used in texts. Attributing meaning to the sex of individuals reveals the social construction of gender. Reading texts where language is used to constitute gender dichotomies demands a certain amount of complicity on the part of the reader. If readers are not encouraged to discuss how the language of a text socially constructs gender, it is likely that gender stereotypes will go unexamined and thereby be reconstituted in each reading.

In her work on characterizing genderization, Penelope (1988) provides many examples of how the language of a text can legitimize stereotypes by assuming complicitous readers. Notice, for example, the female attributions we are asked to call up in comprehending Stephen King's use of the term *womanish* shriek to characterize the wind in the following excerpt from *The Shining*:

> It snowed every day now,... sometimes for real, the low whistle of the wind cranking up to a womanish shriek that made the old hotel rock and groan alarmingly. (King, 1977, p. 212)

In pointing out how the author of a text can reinforce deeply entrenched gender stereotypes through the use of sex-biased language, Penelope (1988, p. 260) asks us to consider whether or not Stephen King could just as easily have used the term *mannish shriek* to describe the wind.

Christian-Smith's (1991) research on adolescent fiction provides an example of how the language of texts can foster complicitous readings and lead to young females' construction of stereotypical femininity. In describing how the language of romance novels shaped female adolescent readers' gender subjectivities in her study, Christian-Smith (1991) reported:

> Through romance reading, readers transform gender relations so that men cherish and nurture women rather [than] the other way around. This, together with readers' collective rejection of a macho masculinity, represents their partial overturning of one aspect

of current traditional gender sentiments. However, readers' final acceptance of romantic love and its power structure undercuts the political potential of these insights. Romance reading in no way altered the young women's present and future circumstances, but rather was deeply implicated in reconciling them to their place in the world. (p. 207)

The roots of complicity in reading may lie in part in our history as readers and the books we have read. As Segal (1986) has noted, for generations parents and teachers have channeled books to or away from children according to their sex. Education textbooks over the years have advised teachers to use more "boy books" than "girl books" based on the notion that boys are *not* interested in reading about girls, but girls *are* interested in reading about boys. Gendered experiences in reading at home and in school shape our attitudes toward appropriate gender-role behaviors and influence what we choose to read throughout our lives.

Concerns regarding sex bias and a male-dominated reading curriculum have produced numerous studies on the portrayal of male and female characters in children's literature and other school materials (Barnett, 1986; McDonald, 1989). Authors concerned with sex bias have written books where male and female characters are portrayed in ways intended to break down stereotypes (Fox, 1993). Taking a somewhat different tack, publishers of commercial reading programs have attempted to avoid sex bias by creating neuter characters, such as talking trees and animals, or by featuring both a male and a female as primary characters (Hitchcock & Tompkins, 1987).

Efforts to create sex-equitable literature, however, have not seriously challenged students' gendered views of themselves and the world. As Purcell-Gates (1993) has noted in her exploration of research related to the complexity of gender issues, real-life experiences seem to be the key to whether or not children accept nontraditional roles in literature. It is real-life experiences that prepare the complicitous reader to imagine a wind cranking up to a womanish shriek. Merely changing the language of texts to include phrases like "mannish shriek" or to create stories about boys who want to study ballet or girls who are baseball umpires will not change our gendered view of the world.

Awakening an awareness in students of ways in which they engage in complicitous reading will depend largely on teachers who see for themselves a role in altering power relations and in challenging the subordination of women. This role will involve exploring with students through class discussion how gender is socially constructed in a multiplicity of ways — only one of which is the language of texts.

INFLUENCES OF GENDERED THINKING IN OUR OWN RESEARCH

We view the term *gendered thinking* not as a synonym for stereotyped thinking about gender but as a cultural artifact that shapes the way we interpret the world. Each of us experiences the world through filters that are colored by our

own personal histories. Gender is but one of those filters; race, ethnicity, class, and culture are others. Therefore, it should not be assumed that gendered thinking always carries a negative connotation. Only when such thinking is used to stereotype individuals simply on the basis of their membership in a group should it be viewed as a problem.

Our own work on text-based classroom discussion reflects a variety of ways in which ingrained, gendered ways of thinking influenced some of the research studies we have conducted in the past. For example, the inclination to cater to boys by avoiding books about girls is something Michelle vividly recalls doing:

> In 1990, while conducting a research project on dialogical-thinking reading lessons (Commeyras, 1991), I rewrote one of the stories used in the lessons so that the main characters were boys instead of girls. I took the story *I Wish Laura's Mother Was My Mommy* by Barbara Power (1979) and changed the female protagonists, Leslie and Laura, into Jack and Bob. My rationale for taking this liberty was to provide stories that I thought might be engaging to seven fifth-grade boys who were considered learning disabled. I assumed these boys would be more interested in reading about boys than girls, and I thought it vitally important to pick stories that were easy to read and potentially appealing to 11- and 12-year-old boys who had experienced many years of academic discouragement. In light of my recent readings on feminisms, however, I agree with Segal (1986) that the boy-book/girl-book dualism depreciates the female experience and severely limits boys' reading experiences. Furthermore, this dualism probably serves to perpetuate the genderization of human experience. In retrospect, I think it would have been far more interesting to find out how the seven boys would have responded to *I Wish Laura's Mother Was My Mommy*.

Like Michelle, Donna also can recall instances in her own research that demonstrate how some gendered discursive practices become so commonplace that they are accepted as "natural" or "normal" — or at the very least, dismissed as being outside a study's purpose and therefore not analyzed. For example, in one study (Alvermann, 1989), Donna remembers sitting quietly by as a participant observer taking field notes in an 11th-grade English class where the following discussion took place in response to a group worksheet exercise titled *Who should survive?*

> I observed students, working in groups of four, discuss among themselves the solution to this problem: *The world has undergone total nuclear destruction. To avoid death from fallout, 16 survivors must take refuge in a shelter for an extended period of time. However, due to limited provisions, only 8 people can survive; the others must be left outside to face certain death. Once you have compiled your personal list of 8 survi-*

vors, work toward group consensus in arriving at a final list of 8. Be prepared to defend your choices from among the 16 people listed on your worksheet. [Note: The list included among others a 30-year-old white Roman Catholic priest, a 55-year-old black male concert violinist, a 28-year-old black mother on welfare with no job skills and her 2-year-old son, a 55-year-old white male university professor, a 48-year-old black male Lt. Colonel with two purple hearts from the Vietnam conflict, and a 28-year-old white female high school English teacher.]

John: Keep the priest. What you got Kessia? How come you pick the concert violinist? (Kessia acts as though she does not hear John's question.)

Marilyn: I picked the violinist, too, but don't ask me why.

Kessia: (looking toward John) He could make money. Why *you* pick the black mother on welfare? You want to keep the child and ditch the mother?

Marilyn: Who gonna take care of her child while she out prostitutin'?

Kessia: She can have child care.

Marilyn: People on poverty — they don't get child care.

John: (looking toward Kessia) Why you pick the university professor?

Kessia: He has a good reputation — he a professor, he know a lot.

Marilyn: He could build a school.

Exzavior: Don't we need an English teacher?

Kessia: Yeah, we need an English teacher if we gonna have schools again.

Marilyn: We got 1, 2, 3, 4, 5...we need 3 more.

Kessia: Why keep the black welfare mother? She ain't got no money.

[Note: This discussion, which was part of a thematic unit on survival, lasted the entire class period. Transcripts of other groups suggest that the talk represented in this excerpt was also representative of the class at large.]

In retrospect, certainly there is much more going on in this discussion than merely the stereotyping of black women on welfare. The remarks directed toward the woman on welfare by the two females in the group send a strong message about what these young women have come to "accept" about personal worth and who is at risk in society. Their remarks also demonstrate how the language of a text (in this case, the worksheet description assigned to a 28-year-old black mother) can legitimize ste-

reotypes in class discussions by assuming complicitous readers.

I did not find the dialogue between Kessia and Marilyn particularly informative, nor even that disturbing, at the time. I did nothing with this information in my original analysis of the data. I was intent on studying 11th-graders' understanding of literacy and what it means to be labeled "at risk" of dropping out. Perhaps like these two young women, my own history as a woman has been so inscribed with the stereotypical positioning of females that I noted nothing out of the ordinary in their talk — a personally disturbing thought and one of several reasons for my interest in writing this paper.

EXPANDING THE POSSIBILITIES

As historically and broadly defined, the discursive practices commonly associated with classroom discussion have derived from Discourses of social regulation. At a time in history when circumstances gave rise to the beginning of schools as we now know them, pedagogy was institutionalized "out of practical needs to cure [ignorance and moral depravity], to reform, to discipline, and to educate the social body.... The school...became the site of...a discourse of both repression and formation" (Luke, 1989, pp. 145-146). At the same time that teaching school took on more and more socially regulative functions, classroom discussions typically became teacher-centered events aimed at legitimizing the authority of the text and the teacher's superior knowledge (Alvermann, O'Brien, & Dillon, 1990; Delamont, 1983; Goodlad, 1984). Not surprisingly, as Cohen noted in a recent symposium on classroom discussion presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), "traditional school learning has had no room for difference, promoting instead a uni-reading — one text, one reading" (Cohen, 1993, p. 3).

Feminist postmodernist theories, however, offer some different ways of thinking about pedagogy and research, particularly as these theories relate to text-based classroom discussion. In this last section of the paper, we explore some possibilities for moving beyond currently accepted discursive practices in learning from and learning about classroom talk.

Learning from Classroom Talk: Feminist Pedagogies

The power differentials described in the first part of this paper are part of the empowerment issue Gore (1992) problematizes in her writings on discursive practices embedded within feminist pedagogies. To understand Gore's thinking, it is necessary to know how she defines *pedagogy*. Drawing on the work of Lusted (1986), Gore views *pedagogy* as concerned with the "processes of teaching that demand that attention be drawn to the politics of those processes and to the broader political contexts within which they are situated...that is,...[a] concern for how and in whose interests knowledge is produced and reproduced" (Gore, 1993, p. 5).

Through her interpretations of Foucault's analyses of power and knowledge, Gore (1992) has identified the need to be somewhat cautious (and critical) about engaging in discursive practices that attempt to empower "others."

For example, by drawing upon Foucault's argument that "power is exercised or practiced, rather than possessed," Gore (1993, p. 52) raises questions about power as a commodity, as transferrable property. In Gore's (1992) words:

> Theoretically, Foucault's analysis of power raises questions about the possibility of empowering. First, it refutes the idea that one can give power to (can empower) another. Thus, to accept a view of one's work as giving power (as property) to others...is to overly simplify the operation of power in our society. Given Foucault's conception of power as circulating, "exercised" and "existing only in action," empowerment cannot mean the giving of power. It could, however, mean the exercise of power in an attempt (that might not be successful) to help others to exercise power. That is, Foucault's analysis of power doesn't preclude purposeful or politically motivated action; it does point out the rather strong possibility that our purposes might not be attained.
>
> Second, conceiving of power *as exercised* points immediately to the need for empowerment to be context-specific and related to practices.... Understanding power as exercised, rather than as possessed, requires more attention to the microdynamics of the operation of power as it is exercised in particular sites. (Gore, 1992, pp. 58-59)

We believe this interpretation of power and the limitations it spells out for empowering others is useful in understanding the precautions that must be taken in attempting to devise ways of enabling teachers and students to interrupt the discursive practices currently embedded in text-based classroom discussions. There are several ongoing projects in feminist pedagogies for involving teachers and students in class discussions that do not violate Gore's concerns about empowerment. One of these projects is in its fifth year in an urban high school in Philadelphia (Cohen, 1993).

In presenting her project at the AERA symposium on classroom discussion, Cohen (1993) focused on describing how "adolescents constitute their (multiple) identities by trying out different positions in relation to others" (p. 2). However, we also found in the students' talk (excerpted below) several examples of how they exercised their authority as readers. These examples, which bear on Foucault's notion of power being exercised and circulating, are captured in a discussion following the reading of a controversial text.

Cohen (1993, pp. 9-10) sets the scene for the excerpts and commentaries that follow:[1]

> **Cohen:** *We are in the second year of a school within-a-school program in a urban high school where 90% of the families receive AFDC [Aid to Families of Dependent Children]. One set of English classes has read an article in a news magazine about the alleged rape committed by boxing champion Mike Tyson. A group of young women de-*

bate the purpose and merit of this reading in the classroom [during a discussion in which] assumptions about male aggression and female victimization are thrown open.... Nina, whose class didn't read the article, questions what is gained by a strategy of taking on serious differences in school.

Nina: I feel as though [the teacher] shouldn't have talked about Mike Tyson's case because that happened out in the street and if you bring it into school there's gonna be a lot of conflict . . . when we was in advisory everybody was arguing — I'm saying this doesn't have nothing to do with school really, to me.

Pam: [The teacher] trying to make us learn comprehension with the article. I think she wants us to think about it, be interested.
Kimberley: She likes us to argue though.

Pam: She don't like us to argue, she like us to learn how to say what we wanna say without arguing.

Kimberley: It's okay to talk about it but not to get into it too much. You know it could start something big, cause we was talking about it in [math] class and it was Lisa — Ms. B. threw her out cause she started getting into a discussion with everybody. Everybody just arguing, everybody not worried about the math work!

Cohen: *When readings invite into the open radically different perspectives on issues young people care about, monolithic, dominant and often unspoken narratives are interrupted.... Still, Pam insists on the value of reading this text in school.*

Pam: With our class [the teacher] was asking, Well y'all read the article, how do y'all feel about the article? And the way we did it, she would ask me and if you had a rebuttal you raised your hand. And if you ain't had nothing to say she'll go on and read the next line. She wanted to know what the person wrote on the paper [and] what did you get from what they feel.

Chantelle: And what did people get from that article?
Pam: What the people got was that the article was not about some particular rape; we thought it was about how boxing, how like Mike Tyson he was brought up like, go for what you want and fight for what you believe in.

Cohen: *Making accepted meanings problematic unleashes unpopular readings* (Britzman, 1992)*...[and] a set of assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, and aggression are destabilized.*

By entertaining a Discourse of differences, the teacher in the example above made it possible for students to explore multiple perspectives on a text that destabilized and blurred

their thinking on aggression and victimization. In doing this, she interrupted counterproductive discourse practices that often serve to silence students in the face of teachers' authoritative voices. She also revealed something of her own epistemology, namely, that students can be knowers in the fullest sense, and that reading the world always precedes reading the word (Freire, 1991).

As Cohen (1993) suggests, discursive practices for making it safe to share multiple readings of a controversial text and to negotiate rather than suppress differences related to the text are rarely found in traditional teacher-centered discussions. "In the talk excerpted here," Cohen notes, "students from different classes [began] to sound like a community reading a text to read itself — asking, Who are we individually and collectively as we read this text, what groups do we belong to, and how can we negotiate meanings with others of same/different affinities?" (Cohen, 1993, p. 11). We submit that the teacher in Cohen's study knew it was not enough to create safe spaces. She also recognized the need for intentional problematizing (in this instance, problematizing the circumstances surrounding the Mike Tyson case), for honoring students' voices (Oldfather, 1993) and for really listening to what students say (Newkirk & McLure, 1992; Paley, 1986).

One further observation we have on how students learned from classroom talk in the project Cohen (1993) described has to do with Gore's (1992) interpretation of Foucault's thinking on the rhetoric of empowerment. If we read Cohen (1993) correctly, the English teacher who assigned the news magazine article on Mike Tyson did not view herself as empowering students; instead, she created sufficiently safe spaces for students to exercise their own authority as readers. Nina exercised this authority in her pronouncements on the inappropriateness of the text the teacher assigned for class discussion. Pam and others in the class exercised their authority as readers by coming up with a collective reading that could be seen as broadening traditional views on what constitutes male aggression.

Learning About Classroom Talk: Feminist Perspectives on Research

As we design and analyze our own research on text-based classroom discussion, ways of interrupting some of the gendered discursive practices that were invisible in the past are becoming evident as we continue to read the literature on feminist research. We see a need to interrupt women's tendencies to take care and make nice. In particular, we see ourselves growing in our understanding of the need to critique the power and stereotypical positioning that adversely affect students' participation in classroom discussions. To choose not to critique such abuses is to ensure that the discursive practices embedded (and largely invisible) in our research will go unexamined and unchanged.

Fine (1992) has described activist, feminist research projects as firmly planted in the political and strongly committed to the study of change. In her words:

> Activist research projects seek to unearth, interrupt, and open new frames for intellectual and political theory and

> change. Researchers critique what seems natural, spin images of what's possible, and engage in questions of how to move from here to there. In such work, researchers are clearly positioned within the domain of a political question or stance, representing a space within which inquiry is pried open, inviting intellectual surprises to flourish. (Fine, 1992, p. 220)

Drawing on the work of Lather (1986), Fine (1992) has attempted to capture what she describes as some images of activist scholarship, all of which share three distinctions. One distinction, as suggested previously, is that feminist researchers are explicit about their political and theoretical stances, even though such stances may be multiple and shifting. A second distinction is that research narratives of activist projects reflect the current social order and are openly ideological inasmuch "as the people who identify and define scientific problems leave their social fingerprints on the problems and their favored solutions to them" (Harding, 1987, p. 184). This is not an unusual state of affairs, for as Neilsen (1993) has noted, we live values first and describe them later. A third distinction is that the texts of these narratives "[unhook] the past, present, and future from traditional, taken-for-granted notions" (Fine, 1992, p. 227).

By pressing us to imagine the possibilities of feminist research, Lather (1990), like Fine, invites us to "begin to understand how we are caught up in power situations of which we are, ourselves, the bearers" (p. 25). This invitation has particular meaning for us in relation to how we plan to design, carry out, and interpret our research on class discussions in the future. No longer willing to collude in reproducing the gendered discursive practices that have dominated our thinking about research in the past, we now recognize the need to put aside claims to neutrality (see Alvermann, 1993) and join in the struggle for what Harding (1987) claims is a necessary condition for generating knowledge claims in a postmodern world:

> [Feminist politics is not just a tolerable companion of feminist research but a necessary condition for generating less partial and perverse descriptions and explanations. In a socially stratified society, the objectivity of the results of research is increased by political activism by and on behalf of oppressed, exploited and dominated groups. Only through such struggles can we begin to see beneath the appearances created by an unjust social order to the reality of how this social order is in fact constructed and maintained. (Harding, 1987, p. 127).

SUMMARY

We believe Gee's (1990) two metaphors for Discourses — "identity kits" and "clubs" — work well, for they underscore how our thoughts, actions, words, and beliefs are influenced by normative social practices that eventually (through repetition) become all but invisible to us. When discursive practices embedded in learning from and about texts through discussion become so routine that we

never think to question their existence, we tend to perpetuate *givens* and risk forfeiting *possibilities*.

In this paper, we have argued for the need to include such possibilities in class discussion through opportunities for students to question textual inscriptions that define or relegate women and men to particular gendered positions. We have also argued for revealing through feminist pedagogies and feminist research the asymmetrical power relationships between males and females and between adults and children that serve to perpetuate inequalities in classroom talk about texts. Like Brodkey (1992), we are interested in "devising ways for teachers and students and researchers to 'interrupt' those discursive practices that, for one reason or another, appear counterproductive to teaching and learning" (p. 310). In particular, we are interested in creating spaces for students and teachers to explore and discuss multiple perspectives based on multiple readings of texts. Finally, we find ourselves agreeing with Fine (1992) that researchers who are committed to feminist inquiry have little choice but to adopt an activist stance in their work. For us, that involves researching classroom discussions in ways that create opportunities to explore and question textual inscriptions of gendered positions.

NOTE

[1]The passage quoted on pp. 10-11 is from "Now everybody want to dance': Making change in an urban charter" by Judy Cohen. In Michelle Fine (Ed.), *Chartering Urban School Reform: Reflections on High Schools in the Midst of Change*, 1994, New York: Teachers College Press. Reprinted by permission.

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